

United States Post Office Building
St. Joseph and St. Michael Streets
Mobile
Mobile County
Alabama

HABS No. ALA-797

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. ALA-797

UNITED STATES POST OFFICE BUILDING

Location: St. Joseph and St. Michael Streets, Mobile, Mobile County,
Alabama
Geographic Location Code: 01-2100-097

Present Use: Demolished 1968 for construction of a new Federal Building.

Statement of This building is an excellent example of the eclectic
Significance: classical revival style often employed for civic structures
in the early twentieth century.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1914
2. Architect: Oscar Wenderoth, Supervising Architect.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The land upon which this building stands was purchased from various private parties about 1909 by the United States Government, which has maintained ownership to the present day. A new Federal Building is now being constructed on the site.

B. Sources of Information:

Mobile Deed Books, Probate Court Record Division, Mobile County

Prepared by Linda Carroll
Student Historian
August 29, 1966

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: A fine example of early twentieth-century civic architecture, the design of this building is a re-statement of the public buildings of the Italian Renaissance, such as the Florentine Ospedale degli Innocenti by Brunelleschi. With a wealth of detail executed in white marble, the construction of this building is reputedly one

of the first instances in Mobile of the use of poured concrete.

2. Condition of fabric: The building was in good condition before demolition in 1968.

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B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The building consists of a two-story rectangular block on a basement, and a lower one-story rectangle in the west rear, parallel to it. The front elevation consists of nine bays, the two ends solid and the seven center bays defined by an arcaded loggia. The north and south walls of the main block are divided into five bays by an arch order employing Corinthian pilasters, and the same walls of the rear wing have seven large arched openings.
2. Foundations: Poured concrete is employed for the foundations.
3. Wall construction, finish and color: All exterior walls are faced with white marble in a regular ashlar pattern and decorated with carved ornament. The design of the main (east) facade is based closely on Brunelleschi's facade for the Ospedale degli Innocenti (Hospital of the Innocents) in Florence c. 1418. A seven-bay arcade, supported directly on Corinthian columns, forms a loggia between larger end bays, which are framed by fluted Corinthian pilasters supporting an entablature which runs the full length of the facade above the arcade. A moulded archivolt traces the outline of the arches, and in the spandrels are circular medallions, recalling those by Lucca della Robbia on Brunelleschi's facade. The arcade is continued in the end bays, but here it is blind and in the center is a pedimented aedicula, also blind. This system of pilasters and arches is repeated on the north and south side facades, except that only the end bays contain the aedicules, with the three center bays open as windows. The entablature is continuous, and breaks out slightly over the pilasters. The problem of turning the corners with this arch order is solved in a most unclassical manner by separating the end pilasters and inserting a rounded section of inset wall surface. The second story is one-half the height of the first, according to the classical canon, and the number of bays is subtlety doubled over the loggia arcade. Above the loggia columns are piers that have engaged columns on the sides and delicately carved faces. Between the piers are columns, over the middle of the lower bays, and thus, an alternating rhythm is established. These piers and columns serve to frame the windows of the second story and support a flat entablature which, like that below, runs all the way around the main block of the

building. On the end bays, there is only one opening, set between panels with circular medallions, and framed by pilasters which rise above those of the lower order and have the same carved faces as the piers above the loggia arcade. This treatment is repeated on the end bays of the north and south sides, recalling the repetitions of the first-floor elements, and the three center bays are doubled in a similar fashion to those on the main facade. Above the architrave of the second story, there is an extremely wide overhanging cornice supported on large brackets that are paired over the piers and pilasters. The building is elevated on a low basement marked by a belt course, at the level of the arcade column bases, that runs around the entire structure, including the rear wing. The elevation of the wing is not articulated by orders, but the arcuation of the main section is continued by arched openings in the wall surface that are the same size and are equally spaced along the wall. These arches serve as windows, having intersecting mullions deeply recessed inside the arch, and are framed by moulded architrave trim that follows the outline of the arch and turns in at the bottom. This basic treatment of a wall, including the decorative trim, also originated in the work of Brunelleschi, in his design for the Guelph Palace in Florence c. 1420. The arched openings rest on slightly projecting panelled podia, which in turn rest on the basement. Between each of the arched openings at the level of the spandrels is a pierced circular medallion displaying a shield of stars and stripes. Crowning the wall is a simple cornice and low parapet, which continue the lines of the first-story entablature of the main section of the building.

4. Structural system, framing: The structure is framed in poured concrete.
5. Porches, stoops: A granite platform, raised four steps above sidewalk level, runs the length of the main facade and continues the length of one bay on each side. The corners are enclosed by white marble balustrades, and the entire platform is paved by red quarry tile. Four more granite steps, running the length of the arcade, lead up to the loggia. The loggia vault is ribbed, with the transverse arches springing from the columns and from pilasters on the wall. The ribs and webbing of the vault are painted in gilt and blue.
6. Chimneys: None

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7. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: Three equal doorways lead from the loggia to the interior and are found in the center and end bays. Within the arch of the wall surface is a pedimented frame with decorated jambs. The doors are plate glass.
- b. Windows: The location and framing of the windows are described above. All windows on the first floor are wooden casements. Those on the front facade have six lights in the center flanked by single six-light hinged windows. Double transom bars create narrow four-light transoms above which are pivoted fans with four vertical lights. Windows on the side elevations are similar, except that it is the center casements, not the sides, that are hinged. The second story windows above the arcade are also casements, with four lights on each side, and have four-light transoms. The remainder of the second-story windows are double-hung wooden sash with six-over-six lights.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: There is a hipped roof covered with ceramic tiles, commonly called "Spanish", although they were employed for Italian Renaissance structures which this building imitates.
- b. Cornice, eaves: There are wide overhanging eaves, as described above.
- c. Dormers, cupolas, towers: None

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: On the first floor, the public lobby is "U"-shaped, wrapping around the work space and postal windows and boxes. There are offices on the opposite side of the legs of the "U". On the second floor, there are offices on each side of the corridor which runs parallel to the east front.
2. Stairways: The main public stair is in the southeast corner of the building behind a screen consisting of two arches and a black marble column with a bronze grille. The stairway consists of curved and straight sections with marble treads and bronze balustrade and brass handrail. The stairwell

risers completely to the second floor ceiling, which is coffered and panelled.

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3. Flooring: The floor in the public lobby is marble tiles laid diagonally with a mosaic trim in colored marbles. The corridor of the second floor has terrazzo floors. All other floors are asphalt tile.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: In the public lobby, walls are faced with pink marble panels and pilasters with plaster in the spandrels of the arches which frame the work space. The ceiling is elaborately coffered in a hexagonal pattern and is gilded. All other walls and ceilings are painted plaster with a moulded plaster cornice in the second-floor corridor.
5. Doorways and doors: Office doors are wooden with two panels, the upper glazed with figured glass. Single-light transoms are placed over most of the doors.
6. Mechanical equipment:
 - a. Heating: Central heating is employed.
 - b. Lighting: The building is provided with electric lighting with drop globe fixtures.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The building is on the northwest corner of St. Joseph and St. Michael Streets, facing east, in the heart of downtown Mobile.
2. Landscaping: There is a small grass plot on the north side and a brick wall on the western boundary.

Prepared by Woodrow W. Wilkins
Supervising Architect
National Park Service
August 18, 1966
and
Charles A. Herrington
Architectural Historian
National Park Service
July 26, 1972

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PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

These records were prepared as a cooperative project during the summer of 1966 between the Historic American Buildings Survey and various agencies, organizations, and individuals of the City of Mobile. The Historic American Buildings Survey supplied the project supervisor, Woodrow W. Wilkins, and three draughtsmen, Carl J. Rosenberg (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), Michael R. Foil (Auburn University), and Lowell K. West (University of Kentucky). One draughtsman, Elbert L. Coleman (Alabama A & M), was provided by the Mobile Housing Board, which agency administers urban renewal. The services of an additional draughtsman, James Eley, specifically designated as an architectural student from Auburn University, were made possible by contributions from numerous local architects and businessmen. The Historic Mobile Preservation Society, in agreement with the History Department of Springhill College, provided a student historian, Linda Carroll. Office space was supplied by the City of Mobile through the City Planning Commission. Roy Thigpen, a local photographer, was contracted to supply the photographs. All local arrangements were made by the Mobile Historic Development Commission, Mrs. Nancy N. Holmes, President. The project was edited during the summer of 1972 by Charles A. Herrington, Architectural Historian, in a cooperative effort between the Historic American Buildings Survey and the Mobile Historic Development Commission.